

The Enfield 'Poltergeist' *This Morning's* revisit of the classic case provokes further thoughts

AT THE BEGINNING OF FEBRUARY, I appeared on *This Morning* to talk about the Enfield 'poltergeist' with Guy Lyon Playfair (writer of *This House is Haunted*) and Janet Winter. The producers were very pleased that they had an appearance by the woman who had been the eleven-year-old at the centre of the events in the late 70s, but were extremely concerned about her resilience and sought an assurance from me that I could keep it generalised and un confrontational, which I was happy to do. When I met Janet in the Green Room, I have to say I found her extremely likeable and every bit as nervous as I had been warned. She has previously been quite publicity-averse and, fair enough, most people would find going on the telly very nerve-wracking indeed.

My part of the broadcast started with the observation that many of the iconic cases of the 'supernatural' have been outright hoaxes: I mentioned the nineteenth century Hydesville rappings of the Fox sisters whose attention-seeking inadvertently started off a whole new religion, and *The Amityville Horror*.

Then I went on to remind everybody how unreliable human perceptions and memories can be. But I mainly wanted to cover the way that stories get told and remembered - the process of narrative. This process produces the fait accompli of a good story which does, and has in the case of the Enfield 'poltergeist', lead to people forgetting the many who did not agree, either wholly or in part, with investigators Maurice Grosse and Guy Lyon Playfair. With several others, I mentioned that the Society for Psychical Research (SPR) member Mary Rose Barrington "... had her issues with it (the evidence)". I did not then, or now, believe that she disbelieved totally. When she contacted me and wanted to state her case, I was delighted to give her space in *The Skeptic* (below). In addition, Alan Murdie of the SPR also wrote about *This Morning* in *The Fortean Times*² and asked me for my comments in advance.

I think it's very hard to go over all the specifics of Enfield. It would take the kind of time that we certainly did not have on *This Morning*. There's no slam-dunk debunking case, but then the evidence is unamenable to a definitive rebuttal. For one thing, the phenomena were

highly resistant to disbelieving witnesses. Playfair himself wrote that "... paranormal events only took place in the presence of people who believed them to be possible"³. In fact, it's hard to avoid wondering whether the agents of the peculiar occurrences at Enfield were simply refusing to play to tough crowds.

In her piece, Ms. Barrington makes the point that "Janet has consistently resisted the fame and fortune that would certainly come her way if she were now to claim that she had faked all her phenomena." While true, that carries the implicit assumption that fame and fortune are the objects of Janet's desire. Having been a witness to her demeanour at a TV studio, I'd be very surprised if that was the case. Anyhow, I'm not really concerned with the motives of the woman that Janet is, so much as the child that she once was.

On *This Morning* I said I felt sorry for the girls at Enfield and I meant it. Janet was shaking like a leaf in the corridor on the way back and I hugged her to try to comfort her. If I was a personal friend, I would urge her to think seriously before evoking the 'ghosts' of her past again; we can't know what or who on earth persuaded her to do this appearance when it so clearly doesn't serve her equilibrium. I find it hard to believe she is self-consciously telling lies, although she seems to have suggested herself at one point that there was no ghost - you decide what she meant: <http://gallery.me.com/mikehutch#100188>.

By contrast, Playfair was enthusiastic in the Green Room about people who were interested in the film rights to *The Enfield Poltergeist*; perhaps *This Morning* was the beginning of a consciousness-raising campaign that will culminate in the release of the film. As a horror fan, I very much look forward to the movie. Just forgive me if I still can't believe that the narrative is based on anything like undisputable fact.

footnotes

1 There is a copy of the sequence at

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nRMj-q2aRwU>.

2 'Ghost Watch' in *The Fortean Times*, issue 228

3 Playfair G. L. (1981) *This House is Haunted* Sphere Books

Deborah Hyde

Mary Rose Barrington of the Society for Psychical Research

IN THE COURSE OF the ITV programme *This Morning* on 6th February it was suggested that I took an adverse view of this case, and as this does not fairly reflect my opinions the editor has kindly invited me to put this right.

I went to Enfield on only one occasion, some time after the phenomena had died down, and my connection with the case is that I was one of a four-person committee asked to collect statements from people who had experiences or opinions relating to Enfield, and to attempt a conclusion; we concluded that there was sound evidence that poltergeist type phenomena had been clearly seen and described by credible informants (foremost the investigators themselves) and that other phenomena may also have been authentic.

It might be useful to explain why this committee was set up. The first the SPR membership heard about Enfield came from the late Maurice Grosse, then a new member with no previous experience. He was joined later by the much more knowledgeable Guy Lyon Playfair, but Maurice, who had an enviable flair for sympathetic relations with the press, remained the main spokesman.

Maurice's main interest in psychical research centred on survival, and he was impressed when the 11 year old Janet Hodgson appeared to go into trance states and speak in a gruff voice purporting to be that of a rather foul-mouthed old man. This aspect of the case, and the pub-

licity attending the whole Enfield drama, irritated some of the more seasoned members, and though none of them had spent more than an hour or two at Enfield they took a broad brush and unfairly (in my view) dismissed the whole case as hype. Setting up the committee had a cooling and mediating effect.

Speaking personally, I was impressed by some very clear testimony from Mrs Hodgson herself, who though not educated seemed perfectly sane. She described some abnormal movements by a chest of drawers, and I felt sure she was neither making it up nor having hallucinations. I did not rely on anything said or done by the children, but I have since been impressed that Janet has consistently resisted the fame and fortune that would certainly come her way if she were now to claim that she had faked all her phenomena. That would still leave some clear effects reported by the investigators and by a woman police officer, who was courageous enough to say that she had seen at close quarters a dining-room chair moving apparently of its own volition.

It is fashionable to invoke 'fallibility of observation' to repudiate attested facts that are unwelcome. But all knowledge rests on testimony, and it behoves listeners to exercise judgement and make a rational assessment of its reliability, not to dismiss it with empty generalisations. There is in fact nothing clever or scientific about making a blanket decision to reject testimony that does not fit with one's beliefs as to what is possible.

Mary Rose Barrington's interest in psychical research dates from schooldays, reinforced by involvement with Oxford University SPR while reading English (1945/7). She then took to the law (useful in connection with other concerns, viz. animal protection and voluntary euthanasia), and joined the SPR council in the 1960s